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PP RUEHGA RUEHHA RUEHMT RUEHQU RUEHVC  
DE RUEHOT #1091/01 2272006  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 142006Z AUG 08  
FM AMEMBASSY OTTAWA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8348  
INFO RUCNCAN/ALL CANADIAN POSTS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 OTTAWA 001091

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CA](#)

SUBJECT: YOUNG VOTERS HAVE POTENTIAL TO INFLUENCE ELECTION

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Conventional wisdom in Canada suggests that young voters are apathetic. Indeed, official data show youth participation rates in federal elections have declined since 1993. However, mission conversations with politically-active young Canadians suggest that many of them are politically savvy and willing to engage, although they seem to favor social protests and events organized through the internet as their primary means of political expression. Youth policy priorities do not necessarily track with those of older generations either. The recent upsurge of interest among young American voters in Barack Obama's campaign might also have a ripple effect in Canada, according to our contacts. These generational differences could bring crucial support in the prospective fall 2008 federal election for the party that can best tap into issues that interest young people and engage them in their preferred media. End summary.

The Disappearing Young Voter  
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¶2. (U) In all Western democracies the turnout rate for young voters has declined significantly in recent years, and Canada is no exception. Only 38 percent of 18-24 year olds voted in the 2004 federal election. A 2007 report by the non-partisan Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) said that young Canadians are not only less likely to vote, but also are less likely to be interested in conventional politics or to be members of political parties and interest groups. Young Canadians are more likely to engage in political demonstrations and to be involved with a group or organization, said report author Brenda O'Neill. When measuring non-traditional political activity, such as political protest and demonstrations, young people participated at a level equal to or higher than every other age category, according to O'Neill.

Clashing Values and Neglect Deflate Youth Turnout  
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¶3. (U) Some factors for the decline in traditional civic participation among youth include a deficiency of political knowledge, a perceived lack of competition between political parties, a misunderstanding of the importance of parties, and a belief that traditional politics are not an effective conduit to political change, according to a study by Elections Canada. Researchers also cite increasing individualism and social isolation due to more advanced technology as a catalyst for the changing nature of political participation and civic engagement. Politicians tend also to focus their energy to engage baby boomers, who do vote more often than young people. Not surprisingly, groups that get the most attention from politicians tend to have an increased voter turnout, according to an Elections Canada study.

¶4. (U) Researchers report that another reason for the declining young voter turnout rate is that young Canadians hold different values than older voters. Since politicians tend to focus on the priorities of older voters, young people believe their political leaders ignore their interests, according to a 2007 CPRN report by Andre Turcotte. The environment, education, and health care are the

areas most important to Canadian youth. They care less about defense and economic issues, according to a 2007 CPRN poll. Candidates who are seeking the support of young voters are using new campaign methods that are perceived as youth-friendly, including blogs, text-messaging, and interactive websites. The Liberal and Conservative parties both use these methods, but interact with their younger counterparts differently. Liberals devote a significant portion of time and money to their youth organizations, providing them with dedicated channels for input on policy development. The Conservatives connect to their youth wings by providing Party news and campaign ideas to their university and riding clubs. They do invite young Conservatives to their party conventions. However, the Tories maintain their dominant focus on issues that appeal to older generations such as security and the economy.

#### Liberals Attract Youth

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15. (U) The Liberal Party has reached out to young Canadians by forming a youth commission for citizens under the age of 26, called the Young Liberals of Canada (YLC). YLC is divided into provincial organizations and riding associations within each province. Their membership has ranged in recent years from 60,000 to 80,000. For biennial Liberal Party Conventions up to four Young Liberals in each electoral district can join the delegation. The Liberal Party has a blog, podcasts, and online videos (coined "Liberal TV). MPs and high ranking Liberals have made efforts to engage youth by hosting events such as beach parties and making appearances at concerts hosted by Young Liberals clubs.

16. (U) In addition to support for the larger party, Young Liberals

OTTAWA 00001091 002 OF 002

of Canada has its own policy objectives such as relieving poverty in Africa, fighting climate change, protecting Canadian sex workers, improving post-secondary education, protecting civil liberties, and promoting same-sex marriage rights. In particular, the Young Liberals campaigned hard to make same-sex marriage rights part of the Liberal platform during the 2006 party plenary.

#### Tories Focused on Older Voters

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17. (U) The Conservatives voted to eliminate their federal youth wing in 2004 when the Progressive Conservative Party and Canadian Alliance merged to form the Conservative Party of Canada. CPC Energy, an unofficial conservative youth organization, is present at forty universities. They also offer summer parliamentary internships for college students. At the provincial level, the Ontario PC Association is the governing executive which divides into riding clubs similar in organization to the Ontario Young Liberals. The Conservative Party seeks to garner support from young people by using cell phone texting, e-cards, podcasts, email and blogs to circulate Conservative news and policies. The Tories require that at least one of the twelve persons in each electoral district delegation be 23 years old or younger.

18. (U) Major issues for youth members of CPC Energy are a free economic markets, environmental protection, and lower taxes to stimulate the economy. However, while young Conservatives tend to support policies fighting climate change, they oppose the Liberal's Green Shift carbon tax plan proposed by Liberal leader Stephane Dion. The absence of a federal youth wing of the party could have political ramifications in future elections if Conservative youth feel marginalized, according to a 2008 analysis by the non-partisan youth organization "Apathy is Boring". The Liberal Party stands to win more of the youth vote due to its proactive inclusion of young Canadians, according to the report.

19. (SBU) In conversations with young Canadian political activists, it is clear that young people from both parties are responsive to MPs contacting them and engaging them in the political sphere. Katie Jellett, the Provincial President of the Ottawa-Orleans Young

Liberals Club, told the political section intern that Liberal MPs support fundraisers and rallies organized by young Liberals. Jellett added that her Young Liberal peers travelled to Detroit to campaign for Barack Obama, indicating, she said, that some of Senator Obama's popularity with young Americans has spread to Canada and encouraged increased youth activity in Canada. She also said Justin Trudeau, son of former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, may be the kind of candidate in the next few years who compares to Obama in appealing to youth.

#### Education and Engagement Are Keys to Higher Turnout

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¶10. (SBU) Extensive and increased school-based civic education is the key to increased youth political participation, according to Elections Canada and CPRN researchers. However, young people are also organizing themselves to promote the youth vote. The non-partisan Student Federation of the University of Ottawa (SFUO) promotes political participation by young voters in local and national politics in the capital region. SFUO Campaign Coordinator Michael Cheevers said his organization does extensive "get-out-the-vote" operations during election seasons. He said the popular "Rock the Vote" campaign in association with the young Conservatives club and the Young Liberals uses rock concerts to encourage students to vote. The fringes of the concert hall are lined with booths to disseminate information about the parties and issues, encouraging students to register and become informed voters.

¶11. (SBU) Comment: While the youth turnout rate is much lower than that of older voters, young people are not politically indifferent. As in much of the rest of the developed world, young Canadians care about different issues than older generations. Youth organizations such as "Apathy is Boring" and "Student Vote Canada" show that young people do tend to organize themselves but do so differently than older citizens, with more emphasis on internet-based forms of communication and mobilization through protests and demonstrations. In a close election, an energized youth vote might tip the balance for the party that is best able to tap into the ambitions and desires of the new generation of citizens.

Wilkins